

TRIBUTES

A Friend Since Schooldays

Right from the start Dom Serventy knew what he wanted to do. He was a born naturalist. At Perth Modern School his favourite haunt was the biology laboratory. The most interesting place in the city for him was the basement of the W.A. Museum. As an adolescent youth, no matter what others might be doing in the evening, he would probably be in King's Park observing the nocturnal habits of the mopoke. When he went to university he unhesitatingly made straight for zoology. While still an undergraduate he was making scientific discoveries in his spare time.

We had been mates at school in the casual way boys have and in the nineteen-twenties a closer friendship developed. In the second summer holidays after leaving school we spent a month together walking with our swags southward from Mandurah along the shores of the Peel Inlet and Harvey Estuary and on to Lake Clifton and Lake Preston — a tract which in those days had a population of no more than a dozen persons. It was a leisurely walk for Dom stopped at every pond and puddle to dredge for some tiny shrimp which he was studying. His diligence made my laziness more enjoyable. I can picture him still, knee-deep in a pond, studying his strainer intently and delicately picking out little things with his tweezers. He finished with a whole battery of test tubes containing specimens, carried like clip-on fountain pens inside his jacket. I just lounged about, saw that we did not get lost and did the camp-fire cooking. At night we yarned at the fireside. It was one of the happiest holidays of my early life. One fringe benefit was learning a little about birds.

A year or two later we began to see more of each other as fellow journalists. Paying his way through university, Dom did some casual reporting and wrote nature study articles for the newspapers. At the university he became editor of "The Black Swan", with my future wife as one of his sub-editors and myself as a regular contributor. Fifty years later he surprised me one day by quoting chunks of some verse I had written about women who "droop like sick cockatoos and feebly croak their dull inanities of modern darning". He had a sense of fun but he doubted whether cockatoos "croak".

Then he took out the 1851 scholarship — the first gained by anyone from Perth — and went to Cambridge. My wife and I spent a week with him there in 1932. He returned to Perth in 1934 with a doctorate and a bride, Gertrude. I met them at the wharf. For three years or so we saw much of each other and shared enthusiasms. Then he joined CSIRO and had to go elsewhere and shortly afterwards the war came. We went our separate ways. Thereafter we seldom met but kept in touch by letters and the exchange of publications. Regular personal touch was not resumed until nearly forty years later when we were both retired and both living in Perth. We just took up the old friendship again as though there had been no gap and had lunch together once a week.

Of Dom's achievements as a scientist there is no need for me to write. He had an established place in zoology and especially in ornithology. His reputation was not only local but stood high in many places overseas. Indeed, on the test of international standing, he would rank as one of the most notable of all Western Australians.

What may not be so well appreciated is the range of his interests and the depth of his affections. He loved books as well as birds. He loved Cambridge, the English countryside and many facets of European history and culture, although his deepest and most passionate interest was in the Australian wilderness, the outback and the Bass Strait islands. He was knowledgeable and always inquiring about local history in Western Australia and accumulated many odd facts about our past and he also had a collection of the "Vanity Fair" cartoons by "Spy" and others of English nineteenth-century characters. His treasures included coins and stamps as well as objects of Australian natural history. He was a methodical and frequent contributor of notes on scientific observations and also had a strong personal interest in biography such as his various papers on Western Australian naturalists. His acquaintances were as diverse as John Maggs the London bookseller, Russell Drysdale the artist and Prince Philip the conservationist. In any publication of Australian ornithology the list of references at the back is sure to contain several ascriptions to D.L. Serventy but, even more remarkable, is the frequency with which his name also appears in works of travel or description by writers who met him and learnt something from him in their Australian journeys. He is widely remembered and always as a devoted person.

Dom as I knew him as a friend did have a few strong prejudices. There were a few people for whom he had a low opinion and some subjects on which he had most happily old-fashioned views. But he kept quiet about what he disliked. He gave to the world all he could give about what he knew and appreciated best.

— Paul Hasluck.



Figure 5. Royal Society of WA excursion to Upper Swan, 26 October 1929. In car — Mrs Compton and J. Knott : On running board — D.L. Serventy and G. Spencer Compton.

The Gentle Scholar

Others, more able than I, will record the astonishing achievements and service to science which are so much the history of Dominic L. Serventy. I would like only to share with others the important human values and wonderful quality of gentleness which my memories assure me were the essential Dom.

As a school boy some 60 years ago, I was fortunate to meet Dom Serventy, through family association, at a time when he needed a guide for some of those parts of the coastal Plain, south of the River and between Midland and Jandakot and the foothills of the Darling Scarp. Being the owner of a useful and tireless Brumby? my knowledge of the area was adequate. No child could have fallen into more kindly hands. At this time too, Clee Jenkins had come over from Adelaide to further his studies. Don Swan was using his butterfly net in the same area. Ted Owen was attempting to see the history of the Plain through deposits of fossilised shells. For a bush boy from a wide reading home this was a new world. It was the written word coming to life in the interests of real living people.

In his quiet way Dom fostered my interests in birds. In a very few weekends he changed me from an egg collecting vandal into an observer prepared to tolerate the leach punctures just to watch the Musk Duck call. His teaching style was by implication rather than demonstration. One definitely had to "learn by doing" to profit from association with D.L.S. but the real wonder was in reporting. To be a child and to have an adult consider one's words worthy of record as though he were the pupil and you the master was an experience so rewarding as to defy adequate description.

As the years went by direct contact became less and less save for the occasional expedition together, generally with others and sometimes with Vincent Serventy and Harry Butler. The infrequency of these contacts did not lessen our friendship or the ease we always felt in one another's company. Our friendship stood another test. When in 1942 my army unit 'disappeared' and its members were in the 'missing believed killed' category Dom with implicit faith continued a one way correspondence. At this distance of time I can admit that in August 1942 in the high mountains of Timor, being under fire at the time, I made a value judgement and buried a Serventy epistle to enable me to retain the most recent letter. This was from the girl who now has been my wife for the subsequent forty six years.

Dom was a surprising contradiction. On the one hand was that flaring intelligence, a man of true genius. On the other hand he could be astonishingly obtuse in simple situations. One never really knew whether he 'shut-off' or whether less serious matters defied his span of attention. He appeared to understand only standard English though it must be admitted that he followed it with brilliant awareness no matter how complex the sentences might be. He understood no slang unless it was that which he had learned as a student when some examples had crept into academic literature. Terms such as "shooting through like a Bondi tram" and "being home on the bit" or "leading with your left when your right's in a sling" were quite beyond him. Butler and I were often cruel enough to engage in lengthy discussions in pure Australianeese not a syllable of which would be

within Dom's understanding. It was a mark of unfailing good manners of the man that should we laugh heartily he would generally, if a little belatedly, join in.

It might be imagined from the foregoing that the contact between D.L.S. and the wider community might present difficulties. Nothing could have been further from the fact. Dom literally oozed confidence in the company of bushmen, jackeroos, farmers, farm hands, station owners, bank managers, shire secretaries and timber workers. He sat on the ground and put them through an ornithological wringer which weaned them of knowledge which a short time before they had not known that they possessed. Down the years I have never seen anyone surpass Dom in this regard. I would place Peter Falcon Scott, as running second 'by a short half head'. Had I been writing for D.L.S. to read, it would have been necessary to end the sentence in some other way.



Figure 6. D.L. Serventy circa 1930.

One of Dom's own stories of bush interviews should be re-told. When times were hard he was engaged in some freelance journalism for *The West Australian*. Most of his articles were about sou-west murders and since there had been one every mile or so south of the Murray, material was plentiful. On one occasion D.L.S. was seated on the bank of a section of the Harvey Drain talking to a member of one of our prominent pioneer families who happened to have the contract for building culverts to allow crossing of the Drain. Mighty Tuarts still towered above them in those happier days. Dom's pencil was flying over the pages. He was fascinated by one or two of the statements made. In trying to tag the tale to time he looked up and asked "When would that have been Gus?" There was a lengthy silence and then a quite astonishing reply.

"I think that would have been about the time Uncle "went home", to look up the tree".

D.L.S. dined out on laughing at himself for the time delay while he sought to understand why anyone would need to leave the company of the Tuarts and cross the seas to England to "look up a tree". Dom would howl with enjoyment explaining how long it took him to associate "the tree" with Uncle's subsequent elevation to the peerage.

Dom, despite his slowness in response to so-called jokes, had a puckish sense of humour and he could take it as well as hand it out. I remember sending him a dehydrated naturally prepared study skin of an Australian Dotterel collected in Onslow's main street. It was only after Dom had announced to all and sundry this somewhat aberrant flight pattern that the completion of the records told him that the specimen had been taken from the radiator grill of a car wearing Lake Grace number plates. Far from getting himself in a rage D.L.S. described this as "legitimate malpractice", on my part, "for the purpose of fun". He remembered the occasion however and when Stephen Davies was ready to leave for overseas and was embarrassed by a lack of a home for his study group of magpie geese Dom said "Give them to Aitken. He likes water birds". Only some quick disclaimers wished them onto Neville Beeck.

In the mid 60s, at Weld Spring, where the Aborigines attacked Forrest (only after he had stolen their stone arrangement to make a fort) Dom asked me a very embarrassing question.

"Why" he said "have you switched from birds to native plants?"

Under such circumstances I have always found that a facetious answer generally avoids future argument, so without pre-ambles I admitted that "I just got tired of the little squeaking bastards". The horror of this assertion kept Dom retailing it down the following days, weeks and indeed years to my friends and enemies alike.

It was round the campfire after the 'skins' had been completed and the notes compiled that Dom really came alive. Here he engaged in lengthy discussions, measured debate and often as not, heated argument. His eyes would flash in the firelight and his slim body would writhe with emotion as he sought to refute crassly stupid arguments enunciated by Vin, Harry, Aitken or Storr or whoever might be putting them forward either seriously or facetiously. His incipient stammer would disappear from his delivery as

the heat of the moment took him. His desire to convince us of the crime of our wrong thinking was so great and of such physical as well as emotional effort that it insulated him against the desert cold and ensured him of a good untroubled sleep to follow.

It is perhaps a mark of the affection we all had for this man that on this sad occasion and the finality implicit in these words I still find myself smiling as I write. On his eightieth birthday I rang without identification and said "I want to speak to an ornithological octogenarian and wish him well." Without asking who, he said "Thank you very much Ray. I had no idea you knew such big words".

A few short years ago Ted Owen, after a lifetime in Scotland re-visited Perth and made contact with Dom. A nostalgic return to the Lake Clifton areas was planned. Since both Ted and Dom had made proper personal assessments of their individual bushcraft they sent out an S.O.S. The changes to the Clifton shore line slowed us but did not defeat us. We had camped where, at an earlier time, Nick Pahl shot Otto Haub (Otter 'Obbs in local parlance) to death because he had frightened his ducks before the camouflaged punt could drift within range of the great flock. Within a few metres of this fateful spot we had dug the pit and fired it. Into this oven went a pair of fat teal, one jointed tail and loin of 'roo, a double handful of young samphire, a pinch of mixed herbs and an essential onion from the cartridge bag, six green figs from Leah Fouraere's tree and a spud each contributed from party members' personal supplies. All this was swathed in tightly wrapped paperbark. I am never likely to forget the delight D.L.S. showed when more than half a century later and after a few false casts my rabbitier's matlock turned up the charcoal evidence. Now he is gone I am so glad we did it.

As I said at the outset of these remarks it was the quality of great gentleness in D.L.S. which set him apart from his peers, but it was this quality too which ensured his one-ness with his group and his enshrinement in our memories. He enriched us all.

— Ray Aitken.

For Dom

I was saddened to read of Dom's death in August. He was someone I felt should live forever. It seems incredible we've lost his good humour, intelligence and tolerance.

When I came to live in Perth in 1971, it was Dom who took me under his wing and introduced me to the W.A. Naturalists' Club. I didn't know him by reputation then, and as he'd introduced himself as "Serventy", I called him Mr Serventy! How typical that he didn't correct me.

It was Dom's enthusiastic encouragement which led me into the RAOU, and it was on his nomination that I became secretary of the W.A. Group of that body.

Needless to say, Dom's help in the field of ornithology was always forthcoming. He set me along a path beyond mere bird-watching.

As a member of the Gould League Council, I appreciated his unemotional decisions, always for the good of the League.

Along with so many others, I shall miss him.

— Noela Marr.

His Influence on Naturalists

Dr Serventy's paper on 'The Relative Abundance of Birds' in *Emu* 37, p.269 (1938) proved an inspiration to me and, as I recall, led to our first meeting. He, accompanied by Hugh Wilson, called upon me at Baldivis, where I was then working. Much of my field work over the ensuing fifty years has been influenced by that *Emu* paper.

At the R.A.O.U. Congress and Camp in 1948 we were closely associated — we shared a two man tent at the Camp — and Dom assisted me very considerably with the reports which appeared in *Emu* 48: 212-242, and gave me access to the printer's proofs of *Birds of Western Australia* — Serventy & Whittell, first published in December 1948. So great was his contribution to the Camp reports that I urged him to allow me to include him in the authorship, but this he declined.

In 1954, I was privileged to assist Dom in his mutton bird project on Fisher Island — valuable experience for me. Dom's enthusiasm was unflagging throughout, working seven days a week and much of twenty-four hours a day — which included night sallies and his good humour never failed — though mine faltered at times, I fear.

In 1971, he included me (at my request) in the Fisher Island team comprising Miss C.A. Nicholls and Stephen Garnett.

Dom and I were involved in planning the field work for the first Gould League camp at Bickley Valley, circa 1951.

— Eric H. Sedgwick.



Figure 7. D.L. Serventy :
Brancaster, Norfolk,
England, 5 July 1932.



Figure 8. D.L. Serventy : graduating Doctor of Philosophy, Cambridge University, 1933.

Gratiis, Vale; Semper Meminero

I am certainly one of those directly influenced by Dom Serventy. When I joined the Western Australian Naturalists' Club in 1956, he was a senior to be respected and revered, but I soon learnt that he would readily advise and encourage anyone.

My closer association began in 1961, when Dom invited me, still a lab technician at the then State Herbarium, to join an expedition to the Warburton Range. On this I became more deeply aware of his great knowledge, enthusiasm and dedication. His interest in the history of Australian exploration and natural history immediately rubbed off on me. A longer expedition in 1963, to Alice Springs and return, reinforced this influence. I recall at the Pass of the Abencerrages he produced a copy of *Australia Twice Traversed* and proceeded to read aloud Giles' account of a visit there.

In 1961 I published my first paper, in *The Western Australian Naturalist* which Dom then edited. It was a small paper, but he checked it thoroughly and suggested various ways to improve it. I believe it was Dom's interest in seeing a paper pass from the written word to the printed page that aroused my fascination with publishing. That fascination led to a term editing the *Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia*, then *Nuytsia* for ten years, and finally to my present position combining taxonomy and editing with the *Flora of Australia*.

One happy memory concerns the rediscovery of the Underground Orchid (*Rhizanthella gardneri*) in May 1979. I had sought this elusive and little known plant from the early days of my interest in orchids. Publicity finally led to its rediscovery by John McGuiness, a farmer of Munglinup. By coincidence, on the day that John brought his specimen to the Western Australian Herbarium, Dom had already made an appointment to call and discuss the same orchid! Uncertain if the plant would last 'till afternoon, I phoned Dom to suggest that he come immediately, which he did. Until then I had been unaware that one of his early tasks as a newspaper reporter had been to interview Charles Gardner at the State Herbarium when the Underground Orchid was first discovered by John Trott, in 1928! On that exciting morning in 1979, Rica Erickson, whose *Orchids of the West* was our orchid bible for so many years, and Marina Trott, widow of the discoverer of *Rhizanthella*, were able to call at the herbarium at the same time to see the new find.

By another coincidence, there is currently an exhibition in the Nolan Gallery at Lanyon, south of Canberra, of photographs by Russell Drysdale. Many were taken on the expedition that is the subject of the book *Journey Among Men* by Jock Marshall and Drysdale. Dom accompanied them for a large part of the trip and is featured in a number of the photographs. Seeing these so soon after learning of his passing deepened my respect for and gratitude to a remarkable man.

— Alex George, Executive Editor, Flora of Australia, Australian Biological Resources Study, Canberra.

The Bush Biologist

Dom's reverence for the pursuit of natural history and the faithful recording of observations, gave to natural history a value and respectability which fortified inherent interest for many of us as young university students. This value epitomised by Dom, who in today's jargon would be considered a "role model" helped some of us counter the academic "snobishness" towards "bush biology" prevalent in the late 1940's and early 1950's. At the same time Dom nurtured the young University naturalists by encouraging publication in *The Western Australian Naturalist* which for many of us was a publication-launching platform. I am sure I am not alone in recognising and appreciating this dual debt to Dom.

— Barbara York Main



Figure 9. D.L. Serventy, G.M. Mathews (ornithologist and author of *Birds of Australia*) and L. Glauert (Director, WA Museum) September 1940.

The Great Inspirer

Dominic Louis Serventy, a prominent conservationist, naturalist and scientist died in Perth on 8th August 1988, aged 84.

"Dom", as he was affectionately known, received many awards and honours which are recorded in many references so will not be referred to here. While his many peers will recall the outstanding Mutton Bird work and the almost turgid prose of his scientific articles, his friends and associates will point to other publications, particularly *Birds of Western Australia*, and, most importantly, his editorship of *The Western Australian Naturalist*.

Through those pages he brought the ailing and discredited voluntary natural history movement in Western Australia to world acceptance. At the same time he tirelessly corrected the literary embellishment of hundreds of keen amateur naturalists to permit their own observations to become a part of the greater study of the world we live in.

Dr Serventy was a passionate believer in conservation and ornithology and gave generously of his time to the Royal Society, the RAOU, the W.A. Naturalists' Club, the W.A. Gould League and many other similar organisations.

He is survived by three sons and their families, and several million readers, for whom his books and publications are not only reference points but inspiration.

We will not forget the books or the man who wrote them.

— Harry Butler

The Conservationist

Ornithologist, scholar, bibliophile; for many of these interests epitomise the three facets of Dom with which they were familiar, namely the acute observer, the fluent writer, and the veneration of the published word.

Dom was not a public figure in so far as he never obviously led crusades. His attitude to changing public opinion was coloured by his respect for, and belief in, the efficacy of the coherently written argument. Moreover he always acted as though this was the only basis for action to change public opinion and perception. This attitude is fully reflected by his approach to the issue of preserving King's Park as a natural park in the 1950's when beautification was the catchword. (*W.A. Nat.* 6(2)25-53).

Dom had a deep respect for the amateur. This was reflected in his dedication to building *The W.A. Naturalist* and assisting naturalists to present their observations there.

Dom's other, less obvious, but nevertheless significant contribution was in the field of conservation. He was a moving force in establishing the W.A. Fauna Advisory Committee which preceded the W.A. Fauna Authority. I sat with him on both these organisations. Dom was ambivalent if not schizophrenic about his participation. On the one hand he saw clearly that unless he was present to feed ideas into the official thinking, and so influence executive attitudes, practical conservation would be stultified. On the other hand he longed to remain free from official allegiance and loyalty so that he could criticise administrative folly as a free individual.

His service to the Fauna Advisory Committee and the Wildlife Authority, extended over a time when attitudes changed from species preservation to conservation as we know it today. Dom's contribution was his endless emphasis on habitat preservation as the only basis for preservation, and he was an active advocate of an adequate and representative reserve system. Thus he was an exemplar which those of us who follow should always acknowledge and to whom we will always be indebted. I would hope that history will recognise Conservation as ranking highly among Dom's many achievements. Moreover, in our own conservation efforts we all begin by standing on Dom's shoulders.

— A.R. Main



Figure 10. D.L. Serventy : circa 1950's.

The Editor

I have known Dr Serventy for very many years, and always found him to be a very kind and considerate man.

In my young life, when I first joined the W.A. Naturalists' Club about 1947, young naturalists were encouraged to send in notes and specimens to the Club.

There was a short session broadcast over the air once a week and questions and identification of specimens were answered by a panel of experts. There was Mr C.B. Palmer, of the Agricultural Division, Mr C.A. Gardner, Government Botanist, Mr C.F. Jenkins, Dr D.L. Serventy and perhaps one or two other gentlemen. It was very encouraging and helpful.

At the Wild Life Shows held once a year in Perth Town Hall, these same gentlemen, and others, gave their willing services. There was Miss Lucy Serventy, always kind and helpful, Vincent Serventy, Harry Butler, and a very helpful person, Bruce Shipway. All these people were always very kind and ready to help young naturalists.

Dr Serventy, then Editor of *The W.A. Naturalist* magazine, encouraged me to write my first observations of "bull ants" fighting at their nests.

Later he encouraged me to study and prepare a long scientific paper on processionary caterpillars, *Ochnogaster contraria*. Other observations and papers followed, all of which were published in *The Western Australian Naturalist* magazine.

Without Dr Serventy's help and encouragement perhaps I would never have done this work.

In 1968, Dr Serventy asked me to do some observations on the Quandong tree, *Santalum acuminatum*. This was to lead me into years (20 and continuing) of research on the trees and a very interesting life.

Scientific information was required on the trees by the CSIRO Horticulture Division, Adelaide, South Australia.

Dr Mark Buttrose saw my scientific paper in *The Western Australian Naturalist* magazine and came to West Australia to view trees and see me. Research was being carried out to domesticate and improve the Quandong fruit.

Dr Buttrose and I travelled around the country roads to view many Quandong trees and selected a special group on which I could observe and make detailed notes to send to him in South Australia.

The Quandong fruit is used for making jam, conserves, chutney and in pies, and is a delicious fruit when cooked.

In the last few years I have been sending information and bud wood cuttings from my tree which bears extra large fruit of excellent flavour to CSIRO, Victoria, where Quandong trees are being grown in large numbers on farms for research, up to 600 trees to the acre.

Recently, fruit was air freighted to America and is being sold in Adelaide at a very high price. It is our first Australian wild fruit to be flown in this way and looks like being a success commercially.

All this work and research would probably never have been done by me, without the help and encouragement of Dr D.L. Serventy, when I look back, he has always been there, kind and helpful, always ready to answer a letter written to him, with advice on any problem or research.

A good man, a very kind man, thoughtful and considerate, and I shall always remember him as such.

Someone we will all miss very much, and always remember.

— Margaret B. Mills, Merredin.



Figure 11. D.L. Serventy : circa 1950's.



Figure 12. D.L. Serventy and K.F. Kenneally leading a Junior Naturalists excursion, Alfred Cove, Swan River, 5 November 1978.

Some Memories of Dom Serventy

Dom Serventy's many publications on a wide range of biological topics will long remain a worthy testimonial to his ability as a scientist and a world class ornithologist. But his many friends and colleagues will miss greatly the opportunity of talking over their research projects with a person of such keen intellect and generous disposition. For Dom was always ready to offer help and constructive criticism to those willing to listen.

I first met Dom in 1929, when I started as a cadet in the W.A. Museum, and Serventy, as a young post graduate student, made frequent visits to the institution to see the Curator (later Director) Ludwig Glauert. Some of my most uncomfortable, but rewarding excursions were made with Dom Serventy, for in those days his enthusiasm far outstripped his bushcraft and interest in creature comforts (his own or other peoples'). Although these improved in later years.

A memorable trip involved a visit to Carnac Island in the Fisherie's launch, to study seabirds. Serventy assured me that the crossing would be smooth, that no camping gear or extra clothes were necessary, and that sleeping on the open beach would be quite comfortable at that time of the year. I was violently sea-sick during the crossing and although the bird observing and beach combing was up to expectation, a piercing wind and concrete-like sand made sleep quite impossible. Other notable trips involved swamp wading at Coogee and Belmont at a time when bathers were considered quite unnecessary in such remote areas and the main concern was to walk alternately behind each other to watch for, and remove, the voracious leeches.

When Serventy went to Cambridge in 1931, to take up his 1851 scholarship I inherited the secretaryships of the W.A. Naturalists' Club and the RAOU. But when he returned a few years later with his wife Gertrude, to the post of Lecturer in Zoology at the W.A. University, he again became active in almost every natural history organization in the State.

Throughout his career Dom remained totally committed to his scientific interests and refused to allow administrative duties or the niceties of protocol to interfere with his research. This earned him some criticism and retarded his advancement in the bureaucratic pecking order, but through it all he retained the respect and friendship of his colleagues and a satisfying lifestyle into a ripe old age.

—Clee Jenkins

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The assistance of the Serventy family in the preparation of the Obituary and in making available the photographs used in figures 1-11 is gratefully appreciated.

— Ed.



Figure 13. Visiting the Annual Bickley Gould League Camp for primary students, 6 October 1980. Left to Right — Dr D.L. Serventy, Mrs Pringle, Professor J. Pringle (Oxford University), Mr David Sieber (Gould League Camp Master) and Miss Ginnie Bristowe.